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THE REALIZATION OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Written statement submitted by the International Federation Terre des Hommes, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[3 August 1992]

The right to housing

1. The International Federation Terre des Hommes (IFTDH) is deeply concerned at the failures in regard to realization of the right to housing. Resolution 1991/26 of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities declares that no State can claim to have fully realized the right to adequate housing for all its inhabitants. The resolution also states that over 1 billion people do not enjoy their right to adequate housing and that the right to housing remains unclear and unspecified in terms of the law. The time has come to start putting an end to these deficiencies.

2. The worsening of the housing situation in many countries has become too critical for it to be left to deteriorate further while an improvement in the economic situation is awaited. Homelessness is not to be found only in the countries of the third world; it is also seriously affecting the western world. The loss of housing is the first step towards exclusion from society. A person who has no home is liable to fall into the spiral of degradation of all aspects of his living conditions, a spiral from which it is very difficult for him to extricate himself. It is virtually impossible for a person of no fixed address to find lasting employment and to maintain the minimum degree of hygiene necessary both for health and for some degree of social integration.

3. According to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS), decent housing is more than availability of a roof, it is also protection of privacy, sufficient space, security, suitable lighting and ventilation, and also a location that is convenient for reaching the workplace and essential services - all this at a reasonable cost. The right to housing is closely connected with the right to health. There is a direct relationship between poor housing conditions and high death rates, in particular infant mortality. According to UNCHS, some 10 per cent of deaths worldwide could be avoided if housing conditions met certain security criteria. Adequate housing provides protection against exposure to the vectors of transmissible diseases by ensuring a supply of drinking water, proper evacuation of wastes and observance of certain rules relating to building materials. Residents, in the interests of their mental health, need housing which ensures privacy and security of tenure, which permits beneficial relations with neighbouring communities and which offers adequate living space, as well as recreation areas and community facilities for children's development.

4. In Haiti the right to adequate housing is far from being realized for the majority. The country has a population of 6 million inhabitants of whom it is estimated that 1 million live in the capital, Port au Prince. The centre of the city is surrounded by a ring of shanty towns. One of these, Cité Soleil, covers 1,100 hectares and has a population of between 200,000 and 300,000, or almost a third of the city's total population. Cité Soleil lies on the seashore at the northern entrance to Port au Prince, in a marshy area. The sea and rainfall create large pools of stagnant water in which malaria and other diseases develop. More than half the population, and the children in particular, suffer from tuberculosis and AIDS is wreaking havoc there.

5. The families living in Cité Soleil often consist of a single mother and many children. They live crowded together, with only one sqare metre per person, in homes made of corrugated iron, sometimes even in banana cartons laid on the ground. The floor of these homes is usually covered with mud and insanitary streams of water, in which the children play, run along the streets. There is no way for these families to achieve privacy or intimacy and they suffer the continuing stress of the search for food. These difficult conditions do not contribute to the harmonious development of the children or to their education. There is, moreover, very little mobility in Cité Soleil, whose inhabitants are virtually condemned to live and to die there. Living conditions being very precarious for the rural inhabitants of Haiti, there is very little opportunity for the urban dwellers to return to the countryside, and with the chronic unemployment the possibilities of achieving improved living conditions remain slight.

6. With the object of improving this situation, a movement affiliated to IFTDH is supporting an integrated housing construction project in Cité Soleil that involves several different approaches. Under this project, housing of concrete is being built which offers sanitary living conditions for families. These dwellings ensure family privacy for the residents, safety during typhoons and the rainy season and the minimum prerequisites for other development programmes. The construction of this housing is also providing employment for inhabitants of Cité Soleil and training opportunities for young people seeking apprenticeship as stonemasons. Another element of the project is the establishment of small schools whose teachers are recruited from among the inhabitants of the shanty town. The building of these schools provides a source of employment for the men of the neighbourhood and enables the children to receive primary schooling, as well as school meals. Finally, the project provides a little hope for the inhabitants of Cité Soleil by enabling them to play a part in improving their own living conditions. It is by no means an unusual project and it could be imitated and adapted to the local situation in the shanty towns of other countries.

7. In Brazil, as in Haiti, the right to adequate housing has certainly not yet been realized for everyone. A very large proportion of the Brazilian population is living under precarious economic conditions in insanitary housing, both in the cities and in rural areas. In Novos Alagados, in the State of Bahia, more than 30,000 people have settled on the outskirts of the town of Salvador. Fleeing the unemployment and violence of the rural areas, these peasants have taken up residence beside an arm of the sea, the only place they could find in which to live. During the 20 years of existence of this favela, the housing conditions of these people have not improved, despite the continuous efforts of the inhabitants to make the area more sanitary. They still live in huts built on piles over the stagnant water. Eighty per cent of the inhabitants of Novos Alagados are thus living over water in highly unsanitary conditions. This district, which is entirely neglected by the local authorities, still has open drains, no electricity or running water and piles of domestic refuse. In such an environment there is no living space suitable for harmonious development of the children. In addition, diseases such as cholera, malaria, skin infections, etc., are rampant and there are very many accidents. The wooden piles are not stable and are a constant hazard for the inhabitants, in particular the children, as the remains of old piles cannot be extracted from the mud and falls and drowning incidents are often fatal. In order to improve its living conditions the population has organized various services such as the collection and burning of refuse, cleaning up the isthmus and establishing schools and nurseries, as well as workshops for young people and literacy classes for adults. The local living conditions and the housing conditions in particular are still precarious and difficult, especially since the local authorities have so far shown only limited interest in the problems of the inhabitants of Novos Alagados. The living conditions of the entire shanty town population of Brazil are very similar to those in Novos Alagados described above and the local authorities everywhere show just the same disinterest.

8. In conclusion, IFTDH recommends to the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities:

(1) to appoint a special rapporteur on extreme poverty to make a study of the relationship between extreme poverty and the lack of adequate housing;

(2) to invite the States Members of the United Nations to support and encourage the work of the non-governmental organizations which are taking action to improve the housing situation wherever this is necessary.